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Wang: Okay. So, this is an interview with James Roberts. This interview is taking place on August 10, 2018, and the interviewers are Susan Wang and—

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Lesyna: Kristine Lesyna.

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Wang: And now, we'll have you introduce yourself, James.

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Roberts: My name is Ian Roberts, fishing vessel *Good News*, and I'm calling in from Crescent City, California.

00:00:29

Wang: Okay, great. Thank you so much. Well, thanks for getting on the phone with us, and we just want to start off with some of your personal history. So, would you tell us how you got into fishing?

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Roberts: I started fishing, basically, because my dad was a fisherman. I started fishing out of Trinidad, California, crab and salmon.

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Lesyna: And did your dad fish in that same fishery?

00:01:01

Roberts: He had—Yeah. He had a boat, and he crabbed and salmon fished also.

00:01:06

Wang: So, how old are you when you started?

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Roberts: I was about 14, 15 years old.

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Lesyna: And what other fisheries did you participate in other than crab and salmon?

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Roberts: I participated in Pink Shrimp and then bottom trawl, herring on Humboldt Bay, and Dungeness Crab.

00:01:42

Lesyna: Wow.

00:01:42

Wang: Oh, wow. Do you still fish for all of those now?

00:01:49

Roberts: I fish—No salmon. All I fish for now is shrimp, bottom trawl, and crab—

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Wang: Oh, okay.

00:01:58

Roberts: ...and California Halibut.

00:02:01

Wang: Are there others in your family who also fish other than you and your dad?

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Roberts: My son fishes with me also.

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Lesyna: How old is your son now?

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Roberts: What's that?

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Lesyna: How old is your son now?

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Roberts: He's 25 now.

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Wang: So, how long would you say you've been fishing?

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Roberts: Well, I was 14 or 15, and I'm 51 now, so a while.

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Wang: So, how did you learn how to—Did you start off in a commercial fishery, and how did you learn how to fish? Was it mostly from your dad, or did you learn from others as well?

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Roberts: My dad a little and then others. And then, I started running boats pretty much when I was 18. So, a lot of it was self-taught.

00:02:59

Wang: And you have ever done anything else other than fishing?

00:03:03

Roberts: Nope. Just, just fish. Never had a nine to five job.

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Lesyna: And you said you've been involved in bottom trawling. And, for how long have you been doing that?

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Roberts: I started bottom trawling in about 1992.

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Lesyna: Was that out of Trinidad also?

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Roberts: No, in Eureka.

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Wang: Okay.

Lesyna: And when did you start trawling for California Halibut?

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Roberts: Actually, the first time I ever trawled for them was back just a little bit. You know, it was more we were catching them incidentally with our other bottom fish, but, you know, in the '90s, we would catch some. And then, last year, I actually targeted them down in San Francisco.

00:04:04

Lesyna: So, you caught them incidentally out of Eureka—

00:04:08

Roberts: Eureka, yeah.

00:04:09

Lesyna: ...in the '90s? Was that—

00:04:11

Roberts: Oh, yeah.

00:04:11

Lesyna: ...surprising to see them show up?

00:04:15

Roberts: No, no. The people had caught up here for years.

00:04:18

Lesyna: Oh, interesting.

00:04:20

Roberts: Yeah. I mean, we didn't catch any huge numbers. We caught, you know, a couple hundred pounds here and 500 pounds there. It wasn't any, you know, a whole bunch.

00:04:38

Lesyna: Did that overlap with Pacific Halibut catch at all?

00:04:43

Roberts: No. I never have caught Pacific Halibut commercially.

00:04:59

Lesyna: So, can you tell us a little bit about your experience with the California Halibut Trawl Fishery out of San Francisco?

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Roberts: It's pretty limited. I went down there for—I think I was down there two months last year. I didn't really know much. I had a, I had a special net built to do it and kind of went down there and took what little information I had, and we went down there and fished some areas, you know, that I thought looked like, you know, spots where other guys were fishing and we did pretty good.

00:05:42

Lesyna: And, you said you had a special net. What made it special, or how was it different?

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Roberts: I just, I had bigger mesh, a bigger mesh net built, so pretty much all it retained was the Halibut.

00:05:58

Lesyna: How big was the mesh?

00:06:01

Roberts: I used eight-inch mesh throughout the whole body of the net.

00:06:09

Wang: What made you decide to do that?

00:06:14

Roberts: What's that?

00:06:14

Wang: What made you decide to, to use the larger mesh?

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Roberts: Using the—I wanted to tow a little bit larger net, and I wanted to burn less fuel doing it. So, I figured if I used larger mesh that it would go easier through the water and, and not have as much as bycatch. I didn't really know what to expect when I went down there for the bycatch, so I kind of wanted to try to be, you know, have it cleaned up a little bit as much as possible and all that.

00:06:51

Lesyna: And that was successful in, in saving your fuel and decreasing your bycatch you think?

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Roberts: I think it was extremely successful, you know. I think it definitely worked well on the fuel consumption, and we didn't have a lot of bycatch to speak of.

00:07:12

Wang: What, what made you decide to come down to San Francisco to fish for California Halibut?

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Roberts: I've always wanted to do it. I've had, you know, the permit for years and never went down there and, and tried it. I've always wanted to, and the trawl, the IFQ Trawl Fishery is expensive to do now, especially for a smaller boat like me. We have to pay for our observers, and you have a lot of program costs, eight percent of program costs and buyback fees that come right off the top. And, I just felt last year, you know, I wanted to try something different and maybe having to open up to have another option that I could do in the summertime. So, we went down there and did it. It worked out well.

00:08:08

Wang: Cool. What is the name and size of your vessel?

00:08:13

Roberts: It's the *Good News*. It's 50 feet.

00:08:15

Wang: Oh, okay.

00:08:24

Lesyna: And, you said your net was special. What is your, what do you usually fish when you're up in Eureka?

00:08:34

Roberts: Up in Eureka, well, north of the 40°10', if you're shoreward of the RCA, you have to tow a selective flatfish trawl net.

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Lesyna: Can you describe that for us?

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Roberts: Basically, it is a net that gets very little rise. It gets about three feet of rise, and the head rope goes back up, you know, way further than the foot rope does. It's supposed to exclude, or help exclude, you know, catching rockfish. It's supposed to kind of be a more of a just a flatfish net.

00:09:17

Wang: When you say three-feet rise, what does that mean?

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Roberts: Yeah. Basically, the, the head rope is three feet off the bottom. The breast lines are roughly three feet.

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Wang: Oh, okay.

00:09:39

Lesyna: So, when you trawled for Halibut down here, you, did, did you have a hood over the beginning of the net?

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Roberts: Yeah. Basically, what I had when I was down there was I had a normal net built, and then, I just had it built out of bigger mesh. The cod end and, and everything was still the same size mesh up here, as I use up here. But actually, it was a little bit bigger, but not, it wasn't eight-inch. But, the, the net was the same plan as the conventional net. It was just bigger mesh.

00:10:23

Wang: Did you see any issues with—We've heard others talk about sea lions being an issue when they have bigger mesh. Did you see that when you were fishing down here?

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Roberts: That's, that's why I left the cod end the same size is because I had actually heard from other people, that if you use a bigger mesh cod end down there, that the, the sea lions will rip the heads off of the Halibut, and I didn't want that. So, I left the cod end the same size, but the rest of the net was bigger.

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Wang: Oh, I see. Okay.

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Lesyna: Have you had success catching California Halibut in Eureka with selective flatfish trawl gear?

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Roberts: Not really, no. Not really.

00:11:11

Lesyna: Why do you think that is?

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Roberts: I would think probably it's got something to do with the hood, you know, the net going back so far, and, I mean, I think that's probably it. To be quite honest, I haven't, ever since we had to start using the selective flatfish trawl up here, I haven't really tried too hard for them like I used to. And now, I mean, the way it is when you go fishing with the, you know, having to pay for an observer and everything, it's just, it's not really cost-effective to go in there and try to catch 100 pounds of Halibut when you're paying, you know, that much money out. So, I haven't really,

I haven't really tried to do it up here anymore.

00:12:05

Wang: Oh. So, you used to try, like, actually go out and try to target California Halibut off Eureka?

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Roberts: We never really, we'd target—I wouldn't say we targeted them, we, you know, go make a trip, and then, the end of the trip, we'd go inside on the three-mile line and make a few tows and try to catch a few Halibut. And, you get Sand Sole in there and Starry Flounder. We'd try to catch a few of those too.

00:12:39

Wang: So, over your, your years of fishing, how has new technology influenced your fishing tactics or your success?

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Roberts: That's a hard one. I mean, there's a lot of technology, I guess. I have a hard time keeping up with it. I'm kind of more older, you know, not—I don't get into the techy stuff, but I don't know, nets. I mean, you have lighter nets, you know, not heavy nylon stuff, and I don't know how it's really changed as far as fish. I don't know. That's a hard one to compare, I guess.

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Lesyna: How about GPS? Has that influenced your success at all?

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Roberts: GPS, not really. I mean, I guess maybe a little bit. It's more accurate, you know. Things are more accurate that way, I guess, but that hasn't really played too much into my fishing. I mean, you can use a laptop for a chart plotter now and stuff like that where you never used to have that kind of stuff, but for the, for beach fishing,

you know, fishing on flat, sandy bottom, which is primarily what I fish, I don't think that that kind of stuff has really helped or hurt anything.

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Lesyna: Have you seen any changes in the marine environment that you think have impacted the fisheries that you participate in?

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Roberts: Well, the trawl fishery, I mean, ever since the buyback, the fishing just keeps getting better and better. You know, there, there's more fish around, you know, less boats, but the, the, the fishing itself has gotten better.

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Wang: What is—Would you explain what buyback is?

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Roberts: What's that?

00:14:57

Wang: Would you explain what buyback is?

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Roberts: The buyback was when—I forget when it was. In 2002, I think, the federal government bought back roughly half of the bulk of bottom trawl fleet, and then, as a result of that, the people that stayed in have to repay that loan that bought all, you know, bought that effort out. And, we're still paying on it.

00:15:38

Wang: How about shifts in market demand? Have you seen that change over time?

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Roberts: I don't know about—I haven't really seen too many shifts in market, I don't think.

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Wang: Or any change in—

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Roberts: I mean, the Cal-, the California Halibut, you know, I was just down there for that one year where I, where I was primarily marketing those, and they were easy to get rid of. It seems like everybody wants them.

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Lesyna: Was it harder to sell them in Eureka?

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Roberts: No, no. They wanted them then too.

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Wang: What do you think it is about California Halibut?

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Roberts: You know, I don't know. I mean, I've ate—I don't know if you guys have ever had them, but I actually like them better than Pacific Halibut. I think they taste better, but I don't know. I don't know if it's, you know, because there's not a lot of Pacific Halibut around sometimes of the year or, or the California Halibut is more fresh and the Pacific is frozen or if it just has its little niche market. I'm not sure what it is, but it doesn't seem like it's very hard to get rid of them when you have some.

00:17:04

Wang: When you were down here fishing, what was your day like when you went out fishing for California Halibut?

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Roberts: As far as what, what do we do?

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Wang: Yeah. Like, if you could just describe your day.

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Roberts: Primarily, we would—I made two-day trips usually is what I did, and we would leave in the morning on the first day. And, I usually made around two, two to three, sometimes four-hour drags, and we, I fished, you know, around the clock, 24 hours. And then, we'd usually unload either in the evening or the next morning of the second day.

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Wang: So, how many people are out there with you?

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Roberts: On the boat?

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Wang: Hm-hmm [affirmative].

00:18:07

Roberts: Was that on the boat or other people out fishing?

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Wang: Oh, out on the boat with you.

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Roberts: Last year, I had two, I employed two crew. It could be done with one crew, but I have two crew year-round. So, I had them both with me.

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Wang: Okay.

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Lesyna: And what do they help you do?

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Roberts: What's that now?

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Lesyna: What do they help you do?

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Roberts: The crew pretty much runs everything on the deck, as far as the net and the wenches, sorting the fish, and icing the fish, and then, you know, a little bit of, you know, wheel watches or something like that if we're fishing 24 hours a day.

00:18:57

Lesyna: Yeah. So, you do two-day trips. Do you anchor at sea overnight, or you just keep fishing?

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Roberts: Usually, we keep fishing. I mean, sometimes, I will anchor, but usually, we just

keep fishing.

00:19:11

Wang: Wow. Those are long days.

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Lesyna: Yeah. Good you have extra people to watch the wheel.

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Roberts: Yeah. For me, I mean, a lot of those guys down there, I think they just primarily day fish. For me, living up here, I kind of want to maximize the time I was down there because it's a four and half to five-hour drive. So, when I went down there, I kind of went down there to work.

00:19:41

Wang: How did you decide, like, what time of year to go down or come down here?

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Roberts: When I went down there last year, it just kind of worked out in the timeframe when the boat wasn't fishing in a diff-, in another fishery. It was kind of a, an off time, so I decided to go down there and try it.

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Lesyna: Have you seen any shifts in your local fishing community in Eureka over time?

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Roberts: What do you mean by shifts?

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Lesyna: Has the community changed in any way? Are there fewer people or more people? Do they participate in different fisheries than they used to?

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Roberts: There's a lot more people now depending solely on crab fishing, I feel. You know, you have—The salmon seasons are cut back. You know, the, the trawl fleet was reduced by, I think, it was half or somewhere around there. So, the, you know, jobs went away there. There's a lot—And, there's a lot of people that got out of the trawl fishery. They got bought out of the trawl fishery, and they reinvested back into primarily the crab fisheries. So, the, the crab fisheries, you know, a lot of people rely on that solely for, for their income.

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Wang: So, crabs are—Are crabs just more stable in, like, in terms of their populations? Or why is crab—

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Roberts: You know, it was less regulated up until the trap limits. It was just, I, I don't know why it has. I don't know. I mean, yeah. It was just, I think it was a less-regulated thing and something that you can usually do from November until July. And, you know, the other, the salmon thing was almost non-existent for years, and the trawl, the, the trawl was, you know, they, some of those jobs went away also. So, that's pretty much the only change I've seen in, that, that I can think of.

00:22:35

Lesyna: How about the local community outside of the fishing community? Have you seen any changes there?

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Roberts: As far as what?

00:22:52

Wang: More people or just difference in, like, what they want from, in terms of seafood?

00:23:02

Roberts: Yeah. We have more homeless people than I've ever seen walking around the streets of Eureka. The drug epidemic is completely off the charts, in my opinion. That, that has changed. You didn't see that 15 years ago.

00:23:21

Lesyna: That's sad to hear.

00:23:22

Wang: Yeah.

00:23:22

Roberts: But, I don't think it has anything to do with fishing.

00:23:30

Lesyna: Okay. Well, we'll shift gears a little bit. Can you tell us what you think your future role in the California Halibut Trawl Fishery will be?

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Roberts: I, I'm going to start doing it more. I might get down there this year. I might not, but I'm definitely going to start fishing down there more and doing it. I liked it a lot. It was profitable when we did it, and that's, that's kind of the gear I'm going to start kicking into within the next couple of years. I think there's some older guys down there that are probably, that have done real well, that are going to probably be retiring soon, and I feel like maybe there could be a spot, you know, there for me to capitalize on that.

00:24:32

Lesyna: And will you continue participating in other fisheries while you target California Halibut?

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Roberts: Yes, yeah. I'll still keep doing the other ones also.

00:24:47

Wang: What's different, what's different about California Halibut? Like, why did you like it?

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Roberts: Well, honestly, it was easy.

00:25:03

Wang: Oh, really?

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Roberts: It was, it was easy, you know, work. It was, it was easy on the boat. It was, it was kind of fun to be down there, you know, doing something different. If I wanted to do it with one less crewman, I could, you know, and save, save some money on, on another crew there if I had to. I don't know. It's just something, it was something new, and I enjoyed it. And, that's kind of what my feeling on it is.

00:25:42

Wang: What makes it easier or easy work?

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Roberts: What's that?

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Wang: What makes it easier than the other fisheries?

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Roberts: There is just, there was so much less fish. Like, in the bottom trawl fishery, you have so much fish on, when you pick the net up and it all has to be sorted to species, and you're talking about so much more volume. Whereas, the Halibut fishery was, you know, pretty much Halibut. You catch a couple skates, maybe a couple market fish and a little, a little bit of crab. It was just so little—The amount of sorting was, you know, just, it was not even close. It was just a lot easier. I mean, up here when you're on trawl, you can be out on deck sorting fish for, you know, up to three hours, and down there, when we were doing that, it was—I mean, if you're out there for 15 or 20 minutes, it was all done. Usually, we had everything sorted nice by the time the net went back down.

00:26:56

Wang: Wow. Yeah. That is a huge difference.

00:26:58

Lesyna: Yes. And when you—

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Roberts: Yeah.

00:27:00

Lesyna: ...and when you say bottom trawl, you mean the groundfish trawling?

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Roberts: Yeah, the groundfish, yeah.

00:27:15

Lesyna: Okay. Can you tell us your thoughts on the future of the California Halibut Trawl Fishery? And, if you have any concerns, we'd like to hear about those.

00:27:28

Roberts: I don't know about my thoughts about the future. I hope it just, you know, kind of continues on the way it's been, you know, and it doesn't get over-regulated somehow. But, I don't know about any concerns. I'm not sure about that. You know, I wasn't down there for very long to, to see if there was going to be anything that could be a problem, I guess.

00:28:04

Lesyna: So, no environmental concerns or no concerns about any, like, market competition?

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Roberts: I don't know about that, the market competition part. The environmental concerns, I didn't really see any, you know, problems with, with it environmentally.

00:28:30

Lesyna: Do you think that—

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Roberts: I thought it was actually a pretty clean, you know, clean fishery. You're not dragging through rocks, and, you know, it's all pretty much sandy, flat bottom. And, yeah. I don't know. I thought it was pretty clean.

00:28:55

Wang: How about what do you hope to see happen with this fishery in the future?

00:29:01

Roberts: What's that now?

00:29:03

Wang: What do you hope to see happen with the California Halibut Fishery in the future?

00:29:08

Roberts: Probably just continue on the way it's, it has. It seems like, I mean, the little experience I have, it worked good, and it seems like it's worked really well for the, the people that do it all the time. I don't—They—Maybe they have some concerns I don't see, but it seems like it's working pretty well. It wouldn't be good if the, the state started issuing a bunch more permits or something.

00:29:51

Lesyna: Okay. Well, is there anything else you'd like to share about your fishing career?

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Roberts: That pretty much covers it. It's, it's pretty boring.

00:30:04

Wang: But you still enjoy it?

00:30:06

Roberts: I love it, yeah.

00:30:07

Wang: Yeah? What do you—

00:30:08

Roberts: Yeah.

00:30:08

Wang: What do you enjoy about it?

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Roberts: I just, I really enjoy being able to do my own hours, and I'm in control of, of my own business. I really enjoy being able to work with my son, and I don't know. It's just been a, it's been a good thing that always—I mean, I can always tell people that ask, I mean, you really have to love the ocean and like to fish to be, you know, very good at it. If you, if you're not having a good time out there and you don't enjoy it, then you're probably not going to be very good at it probably.

00:30:57

Wang: Okay.

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Lesyna: Well, thank you so much.

00:31:00

Wang: Yeah. Thank you so much, and it's great to hear that you and your son are both, yeah, involved. You're passing it onto the next generation.

00:31:09

Lesyna: Yeah. And, I have to apologize. We introduced you as James, and your name is Ian.

00:31:17

Roberts: Yeah. Yeah. I go by—That's my middle name. I go by Ian.

00:31:20

Lesyna: Oh, okay.

00:31:21

Wang: Oh, you go by Ian?

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Lesyna: Okay.

00:31:22

Wang: Oh, I'm sorry.

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Lesyna: My apologies.

00:31:24

Wang: Okay. So, we should put Ian Roberts—

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Lesyna: Yeah.

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Wang: ...on this. Okay. All right. Thank you. We're going to—

00:31:35

Roberts: Yeah.

00:31:35

Wang: ...turn off the recording now.

00:31:38

Roberts: All right. Well, if you guys have any more questions or— maybe this next time year I'll have more experience.

[End recording at 00:31:42]